

University of Northern Iowa

Beauty and the Beast

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Source: *The North American Review*, Vol. 264, No. 4 (Winter, 1979), p. 47

Published by: [University of Northern Iowa](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25125735>

Accessed: 13/06/2014 11:05

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Finally, Uncle Sugar saw the light and sent me back to the World.

Upon my return, I was uncontrollable, full of private crud and mean thoughts.

I went down to New Orleans, but without Donnie T. it just wasn't the party I'd planned on. Went to Texas, too, but the luxury was all gone before I got there. So, about the time the war stopped, I came back here, to Prairie Grove to work in the Purina store.

I see Donnie T.'s Mom at the Kroger every now and again. Each time she looks uglier, naturally blaming me and the Pentagon for the loss of her boy. One time she came at me with a box of Tide and a can of solvent, her face gleaming with anger, her coat flying like a cape. "Where's my Donnie!" she shrieked, chasing me down the condiments aisle, her ruckus the focus of attention. "You!" she hollered. "Leon Busby, you coward. You let my Donald down."

I used to mind, but not anymore, especially now that I've got a love of my own. You guessed it: Betty Lou Greathouse.

Here's how it happened:

I got a postcard from Paris, France. From Mr. and Mrs. D.T. Bobo. It was full of gleeful news. Lucy and Donnie T. had two kids, Leon and Busby, all with Cong middle names. They were living in Ho Chi Minh City, escorting newsmen and making themselves useful to the new order. He was hoping life was good to me as it had been generous to him and his. Then he said: "Love has turned me around. You should turn too."

Last night, I did. I went down to the Creole Palace and worked up a whiskey frenzy, harmonizing with the band, shooting bumper pool. Everybody was smiling and taking me into their hearts. Then I grew horny and lonely and wet-eyed, and went outside to collect myself. Some minutes later I was sitting on the cement steps of Betty Lou's trailer. Nothing could have worked out finer: it turned out she was lonely too.

"Here's the truth of it," I began, telling her the whole story. To avoid embarrassing myself, I just pretended I was speaking to a tree stump or a charred hooch and that Duc Lap was translating.

Then the door opened. It was a classic moment. She was wearing a nightie and you could tell the years had been good to her.

"Come inside," she said, which almost made me explode.

The velvet paintings were still there, along with some driftwood and glass doo-dads and curios.

For a long time, we didn't do anything, just lay there on her bedspread, it being an awkward situation. Then we kissed, tender-like, and I felt a liquid warmth in my chest and went for her with a whoop. She reciprocated, whooping too. Oh, it was superior, the two of us moaning, me being sloppy and Betty Lou taking me to her chest with a sigh; and by morning, there I was, tired, planning and making promises.

Some of us take a long time to learn something. Others a short time.

Donnie T. knew that. I know it now. □

RITA DOVE

BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

Darling, the plates have been cleared away,
the servants are in their quarters.
What lies will we lie down with tonight?
The rabbit pounding in your heart, my

child legs, pale from a life of petticoats?
My father would not have had it otherwise
when he trudged the road home with our souvenirs.
You are so handsome it eats my heart away . . .

Beast, when you lay stupid with grief
at my feet, I was too young to see anything
die. Outside, the rose bushes are folding
lip upon red lip. I miss my sisters—

they are standing before their clouded mirrors.
Gray animals are circling under the windows.
Sisters, don't you see what will snatch you up—
the expected, the handsome, the one who needs us?